

My Years as a Peace Corps Volunteer

New Straits Times

People

February 17, 2012

By Syida Lizta Amirul



Paul Murphy arrived in Malaysia more than four decades ago as a Peace Corps Volunteer. He tells Syida Lizta Amirul Ihsan of his fondness for his adopted country

HE was just 22 when he landed in Malaysia as a Peace Corps Volunteer, having graduated from college with a degree in business administration.

Young Paul Murphy was among the 35 volunteers who, after arriving here in 1971, spent three months in Cameron Highlands and Ipoh learning Bahasa Malaysia, the culture and the details of the Persatuan Peladang (PP) Programme.

“I was assigned as a business consultant to the State PP office in Johor Baru. The office was responsible for the 11 PPs in the state,” he wrote in an email interview.

He spent one to two weeks a month on the road working with the business office employees at each PP. He developed surveys to learn the concerns of farmers, did economic studies, developed credit procedures and taught accounting to the employees.



Murphy (right) at Persatuan Peladang Pontian, Johor in 1972

“In my last few months, I gave intensive training to my Malaysian replacement so that the business practices would continue after I left in 1973.”

Murphy, 63, now lives in Annapolis, Maryland near Washington D.C. He is on the Board of the Malaysia-America Society in Washington which organises

lectures on Malaysian politics, international relations, and economy and culture.

He has a close relationship with the Malaysian Embassy there.

NEW FRIENDS, NEW CULTURES

There were so many memories of his time in the country. “I met so many Malaysians during my Peace Corps service. In my first year in Malaysia, I rented a house with a Malay and an Indian but, unfortunately, the nearby stream flooded and we had to move out.



Murphy (right) with Pak Manin, his host for a week of intensive language training in Kampung Tanjung Sepat, Selangor in 1971

“In my second year, I rented an apartment with four Malays and a Chinese. By living and working with Malaysians all day long, I learned so much about the culture. I attended weddings and celebrated

holidays like Hari Raya, Thaipusam and Chinese New Year,”

When he was on vacation, he travelled to every state and went upriver days from Sibul, Sarawak for days and stayed at a longhouse.



Murphy (far right) at a Persatuan Peladang meeting in Ayer Hitam looking at new tractors in 1973

“I made so many wonderful friends. Some of my students went on to study at Louisiana State University and I visited them there.

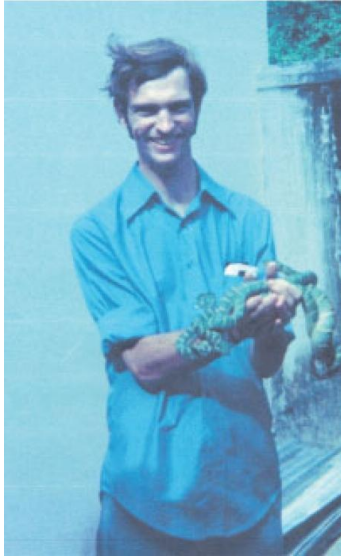
“I was happy to hear them say that by challenging them as a teacher, I had helped them prepare for studies under the American education system. I’ve been able to keep in touch with several of my Malaysian friends over the years.”

KEEN INTEREST



Murphy is always interested in travelling and learning about different cultures, and becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer was a way to accomplish that.

“I believed in the goals of the Peace Corps, to help people in meeting their training needs, promote a better understanding of Americans among the local people and better understanding of other cultures by Americans.”



Murphy at the Snake Temple in Penang in 1971

HAPPY RETURN

He had always wanted to return to Malaysia, but for years he was busy with his career and raising his two children. Finally in 2007, he returned with his wife, Marjorie, and 18 former volunteers to celebrate Malaysia's 50th Year of Independence.

“The festivities in Kuala Lumpur were spectacular and the flags flying everywhere were so inspiring. It was wonderful to see how far Malaysia had developed since I left.

“There have been so many changes that when I walked around downtown Johor Baru, I didn't recognise anything for several minutes. Finally, I saw the Sultan Ibrahim

Building where I had worked and I felt at home in my adopted country.”

OLD FRIENDSHIPS

“The high point of my visit was when I met two Malaysian friends again. The last time I saw them, they were single. Now I was meeting their wives and their grown-up children. We talked so easily that it seemed that I had only been away for 34 days, not 34 years!”

After returning to the United States, Murphy earned a Master's in Health Services Administration at Cornell University, followed by a career with the US Department of Health.

After he retired in 2010, he was elected to the Board of the National Peace Corps Association for the 2010-11 term. “I continue to give presentations about Malaysia in schools when they learn about other cultures and I try to tell anyone that I meet about that wonderful country on the other side of the world.”

MY MALAYSIA

“There is so much to like about Malaysia. The people are so friendly. The population reminds me of the US with its mix of races and religions. The food is the best in the world.



“Given that Malaysia has three major races and it was a former British colony, you can easily get four wonderful and different cuisines at very reasonable prices,”

Murphy says he has been very fortunate to be able to follow what is going on here.

“Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak has spoken to us (Malaysia-America Society in DC) twice and we’ve heard from many other speakers, like Lat, the Malaysian cartoonist.”

Murphy is also treasurer of the national organization of Peace Corps Volunteers called Friends of Malaysia.

“We have donated over US\$11,000 (RM33,000) to charities in Malaysia. Some of our donations went to breast cancer prevention and a mini-hydroelectric generator in Sarawak.

“Malaysia is so beautiful with its lush tropical vegetation and brilliant flowers everywhere. Beaches, jungles and mountains are not far from fascinating cities with great shopping, beautiful buildings like the Petronas Towers and the KL Railway Station and so many spectacular mosques and temples.

“Malaysia has it all!”

